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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001386

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL KPAL SA IS SY
SUBJECT: SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTER URGES US STATEMENT OF
PRINCIPLES FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a warm introductory meeting, a relaxed Saudi FM Saud provided Ambassador Smith with a tour d'horizon of bilateral and regional issues. Bilaterally, the top priorities were removing impediments to people-to-people contacts and intensifying official consultations. Saud assessed that Middle East peace depended on stopping settlements, a US statement of principles based on President Obama's UNGA speech, and willingness to pressure Israel. He suggested movement on the Syria track first would help demonstrate to the region that "peace is not a threat." He reported that the King was pleased with his trip to Damascus, intended to prevent Syrian meddling in Lebanon and wean Syria from its dependence on Iran. Discussion on Iraq, Yemen, and Pakistan/Afghanistan are reported septel. End summary.

A WARM WELCOME

¶2. (U) Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal warmly received Ambassador Smith during an introductory call on October 17. The Foreign Minister mentioned that among the Ambassador's first tasks would be building a new Embassy; he hoped that the Ambassador's tenure would be long enough to see the project to its completion. We are specialists for building quickly, he noted, citing the speed with which the King Abdullah Science and Technology University (KAUST) was built.

¶3. (U) Ambassador Smith congratulated Prince Saud on the KAUST inauguration, noting that in addition to helping to build a knowledge-based economy in Saudi Arabia, it also presented opportunities for expanding business ties. The Prince agreed, noting that the so-called "Special Relationship" between the US and Saudi Arabia had actually been built by business people.

BILATERAL PRIORITIES: BUILDING HUMAN BRIDGES

¶4. (C) Prince Saud said he had two priorities for the bilateral relationship: first, removing impediments to people-to-people contact (Saud used the term "human relations"), including visa delays, student affairs, and security issues; and second, intensifying high-level contacts to ensure continuous coordination and consultation on key policy outlooks. Saud stressed that Saudi officials sought honest exchanges, and cited an Arab proverb, "your friend is he who tells you the truth, not he who believes everything you say."

WEANING SYRIA FROM IRAN

15. (C) The SAG leadership was pleased with the King's trip to Damascus, which was undertaken to follow up the intra-Arab reconciliation initiative he had launched at the Arab League's summit in Kuwait in February. The main Saudi concern was to ensure that Lebanon would be free of outside interference. Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad agreed, and pledged an end to Syrian meddling. It appeared that the Syrian government was following through on its "commitments" (not further specified), and this was encouraging, though the SAG remained wary. Prince Saud summed up the Saudi attitude by quoting late President Reagan, "trust but verify." The second major goal of the trip was to begin to wean Syria from its dependence on Iran, though this was not directly discussed with the Syrians. The Saudis believed that isolation only served to reinforce Iranian influence; a return to the Arab fold would help mitigate Iranian meddling in the region. Saud observed that the Syrian-Hizbullah-Iran "triumvirate" was an anxiety-ridden alliance susceptible to being undermined. Their interests were in competition, and occasional conflicts had arisen in the past and would likely recur.

USE THE SYRIA TRACK TO SPUR PEACE

16. (C) Part of the process of re-engaging Syria, Prince Saud suggested, ought to involve restarting the Israeli-Syria track. "Peace between Israel and Syria is there for the taking," he observed, and "we think this would be a good idea." Some in the region worry that an agreement with Syria would mean a delay in a deal with the Palestinians, but Saud argued that to the contrary, a Syria-Israeli peace deal would

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negate perceptions that "peace is a threat."

MEP ENGAGEMENT: OBAMA'S UNGA SPEECH
SHOULD BE THE BASIS FOR A PEACE PLAN

17. (C) Would the Saudi encouragement to restart the Syria track translate into active participation in a multilateral effort for Arab-Israeli peace, the Ambassador asked. Predictably, Saud answered cautiously, and making no promises, noted that the Saudis' requirements were outlined in the Arab Peace Initiative. The Arab League's Peace Committee had been scheduled to meet this week, he noted, but was postponed until after mid-October, when Secretary Clinton was scheduled to report to the President about talks with various parties, to hear President Obama's plan.

18. (C) The Saudis and other Arabs hoped to see a statement of principles following mid-October that would cover the points made in President Obama's speech to the UNGA. If those points could be confirmed as a statement of US policy, and the Arab League assured of this in some way, via a letter or some other communication, Arab participation in a multilateral effort was possible. As for bilateral contacts, the Prince recalled that the Saudis had participated in "all the meetings after Madrid" on the basis of the argument that such activities would "make Israel more secure" but this only resulted in Israeli dealings with some countries and not others and not the Palestinians, and no peace. Bilateral contacts must follow peace, not precede it, Saud said firmly.

SETTLEMENTS MUST STOP

19. (C) The settlement issue was critical. Negotiations could not resume so long as settlement activity continued, including natural growth. The settlement activity weakened Abbas; what was he negotiating, the return of Palestinian land or giving up more land? Saud rejected the argument that some of this activity was occurring in Israeli areas and therefore didn't really constitute "expansion." There was no

legitimate "Israeli" land in the West Bank.

THE PALESTINIANS MUST UNITE

¶10. (C) On the Palestinian side, however, the Egyptian-led reconciliation talks had yet to bear fruit. The Egyptians had given Hamas a revised agreement and offered a new date for meeting of all Palestinian factions; so far Hamas had been noncommittal. The Arab League was planning a summit to endorse a deal following the meeting planned in Cairo.

Evincing some exasperation, Saud remarked that the Palestinians, with their "innumerable military factions," fought themselves more than they fought their enemies; "what are they liberating?" A single security apparatus was essential to any hope of a Palestinian state; sovereignty would be impossible without it.

FM SAUD'S PEACE PRESCRIPTION

¶11. (C) The Foreign Minister remarked ruefully that though he'd been in office for a long time, "I don't have much to show for it." The problems he had dealt with 30 years ago still festered. While he agreed with the Ambassador that President Obama had presented the world with "a window of opportunity," he said that the Arab-Israeli problem remained unresolved because successive would-be peace makers repeatedly "ignored the reality of the situation that Israel refused to accept peace on the basis of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and on international legality, i.e., UNSCRs 242 and 338." Against this was continuing "massive" assistance to Israel on the premise that it needed security to make peace. Today, Saud asserted, Israel couldn't be more secure. It had a nuclear arsenal and security guarantees from the US, Russia, and the Europeans. Yet, they still talked about security.

¶12. (C) Palestinian terrorism and suicide bombings were a symptom of hopelessness, Saud posited. Why would a 16-year old girl blow herself up, he asked rhetorically. Instead of condemning her act, one needed to understand how bleak and blank the future looked to her. This didn't happen because the Palestinians had "a gene for terrorism." It was the result of the conditions they lived under, the daily humiliation to which they were subjected by Israeli security forces. Their lives were miserable. This was what made peace impossible. Israel needed to rely on the good will of

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its neighbors rather than on security guarantees. They were offered the Arab Peace Initiative: peace with 23 Arab countries and Muslim countries in a single agreement. Without a turnaround in the Israeli mind-set, however, there could be no peace. Only the US -- which "spends more per capita on Israeli citizens than on its own citizens" -- could pressure Israel to change. Unless the US recognized this, and unless US policy changed, there could be no peace.

¶13. (C) Other topics of discussion -- including Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan/Pakistan -- are reported septel.

HEALTH NOTE

¶14. (C) FM Saud appears to be making a good recovery from his recent surgery. He was wearing a neck brace but looked more rested and he seemed to be able to move his head more easily than before the surgery. He was a bit subdued, and spoke more slowly and with greater effort. However, he remained alert and engaged throughout the meeting and his manner was relaxed and friendly.

SMITH